Wired for Social Justice

Speech by Blair Levin, Executive Director, Omnibus Broadband Initiative, at the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council's Broadband and Social Justice Summit, January 22, 2010.

When President Eisenhower was desegregating schools and the Armed Forces, he said: "there must be no second class citizens in this country."

No one in this room would argue. But as society changes, the attributes of citizenship can change as well.

And so in every age the question must be asked anew: "Are our policies contributing to a form of second class citizenship?"

This is a question we have spent a great deal of time—difficult time—working on as we try to develop a national broadband plan

And that is what I want to talk about today.

I want to have a frank conversation about how we can ensure that in a society in which citizens increasingly interact, transact, communicate, collaborate, contribute and work online, digital citizenship is denied to no one.

Over the last thirty years, we have seen increases in income inequality, residential segregation and social isolation, and the concentration of disadvantage.

The number of neighborhoods today with a dangerous poverty rate—poverty above 30%-- is higher than it was in 2000.

In areas with a dense concentration of poverty, jobs disappear. Opportunity disappears.

The American tradition of justice, of achieving the American dream, emphasizes equality of opportunity – of having access to equal sets of resources that can enable us, our families, our children to succeed.

Let me be clear: access to high-speed Internet, even when paired with the digital skills needed to use it, is not a guarantee of such opportunity – it also requires values such as hard work and diligence that neither technology nor government can provide.

But broadband can help people get access to better jobs, better education, better health care information and improved government services.

And those services should be accessible anytime, anywhere, not requiring a day spent traveling to and waiting in line at government welfare offices in the midst of a workday.

This is no theoretical exercise. Connecting those previously excluded can bring real results.

In education, it means providing students with more and better courses. With so many millions of students unprepared for college, broadband-enabled distance learning can give kids who previously did not have access to AP courses within their school, a better chance to learn.

High-speed internet means increasing opportunity outside the classroom as well. In Beverly Hills, the average household has 199 age-appropriate books for children. In nearby Watts, the typical house has less than 1.

Think of the potential of a cheap, vast, digital library for all children. Does this mean that every child will read every book? No.

But does it remove a barrier to creating more equal opportunity? Absolutely.

And it's not just about educating our children.

It's also about jobs.

Without Internet access, finding jobs, applying for jobs and training for jobs is onerous today, potentially impossible tomorrow.

In August, there were 2.2 million job postings across top online job sites. Moreover, information technology occupations pay wages 38% higher than the national average.

The Internet can increase the productivity of America's small businesses, and it lowers the barriers and costs associated with entrepreneurship.

It's also vital to our nation's physical health.

Without Internet access, more sick people across the country will not get the treatment they need.

Our country is expected to have a shortage of 49,000 to 185,000 physicians by 2020. Compounding this challenge is the lack of specialists like neurologists in vast swaths of the country, meaning that many Americans have a hard time accessing quality care.

But broadband video medical consultation can provide people who live in communities too far from medical specialists access to critical time sensitive diagnoses that saves lives.

Beyond the access to more equal educational, economic and health opportunities, a critical part of being a digital citizen is being able to increase political participation and civic engagement online. We know that media of all forms in all eras has had a tremendous impact in galvanizing

political change and civil rights—telephone trees, for example, served as a way for people to activate their social networks during the Montgomery Bus Boycotts.

Today, we see many examples of citizens using the Internet to start and spread civic conversations. In the 2008 campaign, 74% of Internet users got involved online in the political process.

The basic democratic principal that "the public's business should be done in public" holds – and now the public is increasingly found online.

As we think about civic engagement, we must recognize that the Internet is a library. It's a television. It's a telephone and a public square.

These are all things for which our country has had a policy that they should be universal because of the value they bring us individually and collectively

But if we are going to be honest with ourselves, we who believe in the importance of ubiquitous and affordable broadband have to confront an uncomfortable question.

Among Americans who report they live in a household whose annual income is $20,000 or less, slightly fewer than 60% use the Internet and only 40% have broadband at home. But nearly 80% have premium television at home.

So the question is, if broadband is as valuable as we think it is—as we know it to be—why is there such a dramatic adoption gap?

Cost is certainly an issue, and we all want to see broadband be affordable. But it can't be—it isn't—the only issue.

First, we have to consider the way network effects impact computer usage relative to television usage. Even if you are the only person on your block with a TV, it is still pretty darn fun.

The Internet is different. To the extent two-way communication through email, social networking platforms or Skype make up the primary incentive for adoption, that value is meaningless unless communities adopt together.

Emailing yourself isn't as much fun as emailing your friends.

Skyping yourself is downright depressing.

Unless the communities you care about are online, exchanging information and creating content, it is hard to feel the Internet is relevant.

In short, TV is an individual sport; the Internet is a team sport.

Moreover, the TV/Internet gap also suggests concern about the skills needed to participate in what the Internet can offer. Even though it seems to require about a dozen remote controls to turn on my television, it is still an easy to use device.

Operating the device that connects you to the Internet is much tougher.

And that is just the beginning.

Making the Internet useful requires a basic understanding of how to find and locate trustworthy, substantive content, how to safely interact online and how to protect personal information.

Further, 14% of the U.S. adult population, or 30 million people, read at a "below basic" literacy level while 63 million Americans are just at basic.

Literacy levels don't interfere with television usage, but without sufficient useful content geared towards those reading levels, the utility of the Internet for those Americans drops dramatically. There is no computer literacy without basic literacy.

Why should these barriers of cost, relevance and skill matter to us?

To answer that, we need to confront yet another uncomfortable truth – with so many not yet having broadband access or the skills to make it matter, the Internet has the potential to exacerbate inequality.

If learning online accelerates your education, if working online earns you extra money, if job hunting online connects you to more opportunities – for those offline, the gap only widens.

In 2008, when Internet types celebrated the seemingly historic YouTube presidential debates that allowed citizens, not professional journalists, to submit questions to candidates, few dwelled on the fact that if you couldn't get online, or didn't know how to upload a video, you couldn't participate.

This inequality matters.

Evidence suggests that increasing inequality may lead to overall lower productivity. Inequality may lead to worse health outcomes. And inequality may breed more inequality by creating political incentives that can exacerbate the problem.

An increasing gap between the haves and have-nots also undermines the solidarity that democratic citizenship requires. There are fewer and fewer institutions where people from all walks of life can encounter each other – we don't share the same public schools or public transit or public libraries —which is corrosive to civic life.

The Internet could be one of those places, but technology is only as good as the people who use it, and the more who do, the richer it will become.

So what do we do? Yes, our government needs to invest to make broadband available to citizens throughout the United States. We need to ensure it is affordable.

But we also need to do something else. If you build it, they won't always come. Technological advancement does not automatically lead to a solution to social inequality.

It's a tough problem.

But in an instructive way, the problem we face in ensuring that all Americans are first-class digital citizens has parallels in the corporate world 15 years ago.

As corporations first began to invest heavily in IT, they weren't getting the results they wanted.

Why?

A recent book from MIT Press, "Wired for Innovation," found, unsurprisingly, that some of the best performing companies that invested heavily in IT saw substantial gains from those investments.

But some firms that added lots of IT capability got little return on their investment.

The difference?

Those that succeeded also invested in building skills among their workers and reshaping the way their organizations worked to actually leverage the IT investment. They had to make sure that there was harmony between the mission of the organization, the applications to drive the mission, the IT investment to enable the mission, and the understanding and ability of the work force to operate with the applications, on the technology, and toward the mission – a process the book suggests often takes 5 to 7 years.

The book illustrated many cases where smart companies spent money foolishly or barely understood the impact of technology on the firm. If there is this much uncertainty and variation in making technology investments matter in the boardroom, taking technology into communities is harder still.

In short, connectivity to devices is just not enough.

For America to be "wired for social justice," just having the wiring—or wireless signals—will not be enough.

So how do we do address this challenge? We turn to you with some ideas and with just as many questions that we hope you can help us answer as our collaborators in this mission.

Our work in the broadband team suggests three ways to address the challenge. One: social infrastructure. Two: social innovation. And three: social purpose media.

First, social infrastructure.

We know one of the reasons for persistent gaps in adoption has to do with the nature of the social infrastructure surrounding late adopters.

A study found that people are more likely to buy their first computer if they live in areas with relatively high proportions of home computer ownership or if a relatively high proportion of their community of family and friends own computers. This "neighborhood effect" helps people discover the utility and usability of an innovation, because, as I mentioned before, the Internet is a team sport.

So we must weave our investments in digital access into the fabric of our communities. We must build the capacity of local partners and local stakeholders – from community health centers to local workforce development programs, libraries, boys and girls clubs, and community religious institutions – who know how to serve as the "trusted partner" in their communities that can help new users out of the gate.

But we have to ask, how can the federal government be working more effectively with these organizations? How can we more effectively scale up the highest impact local approaches?

Second, social innovation

The last decade has seen an explosion in how individuals and organizations are using the Internet to improve their communities, both local and global.

For instance, DonorsChoose, an online peer-to-peer platform that lets people donate directly to support specific projects at public schools around the country. As of 2008, the site has allowed citizens to donate to over 45,000 projects that have helped over 1 million students in need.

Or Kiva.org, a microfinance website, that has distributed over $100 million in loans from over 600,000 citizen lenders to micro-entrepreneurs in impoverished areas around the world..

Or the Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Great Atlanta, a nationally recognized model for its foreclosure-prevention counseling, in part by using 24/7 around-the-clock accessible phone and online foreclosure counseling, letting them reach troubled homeowners in all 50 states, instead of just in the region immediately surrounding their physical offices.

We have seen some tremendously successful social entrepreneurs making substantive community change online but what can we do to facilitate more?

Third, social purpose media

So many in this room have done the important work of ensuring the FCC keep an eye on diversity in doling out the scarce resources of the past. But the media environment, with traditional constraints and economics of scarcity, is changing.

Now, great content wins. Non-adopters need access to more great, relevant, skill-building content. Much like the printing press allowed the power of information to diffuse from the hands of the elite few to the many, the Internet has allowed for the democratization of content from the silly to the sublime, and we need more of it.

Of course, this should include high-quality government content, particularly for services that reach our poorest populations so that disadvantaged communities can spend more time online, not waiting in line, for basic services.

This also includes mobile content. Research demonstrates that for communities of color, the broadband gap is much less on the mobile web.

But, when it comes to social purpose content that will actually help people's lives, is there really always an app for that? How can we incentivize and support the creation of more quality content that will teach basic literacy skills, digital literacy skills, financial literacy skills?

From the GI Bill to federal investments in basic research, government has been active in increasing the American capacity for education, innovation, and entrepreneurship. We don't know exactly where broadband will lead us.

Few anticipated the fierce explosion of new ideas, organizations, and business models the Internet would facilitate. In 2003, a quarter of American workers were in jobs that were not even listed among the census bureau's occupation codes in 1967.

But even if we can't precisely predict our digital future we know that it leads to **more**. More opportunities to communicate, more viewpoints, more ideas, more services, more choices, more businesses, more people working together to solve problems that require collaboration and more potential customers.

But to achieve more, we must include more Americans. We must ensure that there are no digital second-class citizens.

This week we appropriately honor the legacy of the Dr. Martin Luther King.

I want to close with a quote from him—one of his lesser cited quotes yet one that both demonstrates that his foresight was breathtaking and that if he were here today he would be on the forefront of this issue.

Over 40 years ago, he said: "There can be no gainsaying about the fact that a great revolution is taking place in the world today...That is, a technological revolution with the impact of automation and cybernation...Modern man through scientific genius has been able to dwarf distance. Through our genius we have made this world a neighborhood. And yet we – we have not yet had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this."

Universalization of broadband isn't merely an end, it is a means: A means to unlocking greater innovation, education, entrepreneurship, opportunity, and, yes, social justice.

Thank you and I look forward to your continuing contribution to this ongoing effort.